

SAN MARCO REVISITED

OTTO DEMUS

The title of this contribution is a misnomer: I have not revisited Venice, let alone S. Marco, since I climbed down from the scaffoldings for the last time in summer 1979. I did, however, revisit S. Marco in my thoughts, dreams (some of them nightmares), and even in a few writings. Common to most of these numerous imagined visits was the regret that it was not possible to rewrite certain passages of my book on the mosaics of S. Marco, published in 1984¹ but written, in some parts, even ten years earlier.

One of these passages is the chapter on the Life of the Virgin and the Youth of Christ in the north transept. Although I still believe that what I said in this chapter (vol. I/1, 127 ff) on the iconography and the model of these mosaics makes sense, I am now certain that the execution of the present work does not belong to the original decoration but is part of the extensive restoration or, rather, replacement of early work by new mosaics in a campaign that took place at the very end of the twelfth or even the first years of the thirteenth century.

The reasons for my dating the models of these mosaics in the early twelfth century I have given in my book—so I need not repeat them here. In the main, I followed the lead of Mme. J. Lafontaine-Dosogne,² the best specialist on this part of Christian iconography, whose close reasoning seems to me now as convincing as it did at the time I wrote the chapter in question. I still believe that the artists who carried out the original decorations of S. Marco followed these models so closely as to preserve even those of their traits which were intimately connected with the fact that these models were book illuminations. What I am not so certain

about now is that the “original” works in the transept were mosaics—it is quite possible that they were only wall paintings. I need not enlarge on the fact that mosaics and wall paintings existed side by side in many cases as parts of original decorations—I need name only Hosios Lukas and St. Sophia in Kiev. Whether these original representations of the Life of the Virgin had suffered in the course of time or were damaged by some catastrophe—fire or earthquake—it now seems certain to me that they were actually replaced by the present mosaics at the very end of the renewal campaign under the Doges Sebastiano Ziani (1172–78), Orio Malipiero (1178–92), Enrico Dandolo (1192–1205), and Pietro Ziani (1205–29), which means that they were made after the completion of the Passion and Resurrection cycles of the west vault of the central dome. Thus they continued the “downward” trend of the Thomas and “Noli me tangere” mosaics, while the main workshop of the “Passion Master” kept up—more or less—the standard and the stylistic development of these latter works with the mosaics of the Lives of the Apostles.

At the same time the workmen who set or renewed the mosaics of the Life of the Virgin must have aimed at copying their predecessors as closely as possible (whether these were wall painters or mosaicists), preserving all their “miniature” characteristics, and even some of the technical features of early mosaic work in S. Marco, features which are to be found mainly in the contiguous mosaics of the transepts and the choir chapels. The result is an almost nondescript style which one would not willingly place in the period between the magnificent art of the Passion and Resurrection master on the one side and the style (or styles) of the great Gethsemane mosaic of the south wall of the west arm on the other, a mosaic which must be dated between 1215 and 1220.

The only intimations of the existence of such an “interim” style in S. Marco are the “geometrical”

¹O. Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice* (Chicago, 1984).

²J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge dans l'Empire byzantin et en Occident*, 2 vols., Académie Royale de Belgique. Classe des Beaux-Arts. Mémoires, ser. 2, II/3 (Brussels, 1964–65).

and “antiorganic” elements in the Thomas and “Noli me tangere” scenes. Outside S. Marco and outside the sphere of mosaic altogether, the existence of a style similar to that of the Life of the Virgin has been pointed out by L. Eleen in some manuscript illuminations of north Italian, possibly Veronese, origin.³ Some of these miniatures are so close to the mosaics in question that one would like to assume some sort of direct connection; such an assumption, however, is not absolutely necessary. It suffices to suppose that the mosaic master who set the Life of the Virgin came from a similar milieu—which means that he was, in all probability, not a Venetian but a painter from the terra ferma and, most likely, that he was not a fully trained mosaicist but a workman (or that there were several workmen of this sort) who had only a superficial training in the technique of mosaic making, a training acquired possibly in S. Marco itself in the following of the Thomas workshop and in imitating some of the technical tricks of some of the earliest Venetian mosaics. He (or they) must have worked at a time when trained mosaic workers were scarce so that the authorities had to make do with half-trained and rather poor artisans.

Since one error rarely remains isolated, my mistake in dating and placing the mosaics of the Life of the Virgin at the end of the first decoration, instead of at the tail end of the second, led to an equally erroneous placing of the only work in the lagoon that is akin to the mosaics in question, namely, the apse mosaic of S. Donato in Murano. As things appear now, the Virgin in the apse of this

church must be dated later than my dating, later than the magnificent Virgin of Torcello: the relationship between Murano and Torcello must be similar to that between the Passion mosaics of S. Marco and those of the Life of the Virgin. Thus the date of the pavement of Murano (1141) can have nothing to do with the date of the apse mosaic.

I have said above that I now regard the style of the Life of the Virgin mosaics (and consequently that of the Murano apse) as a local, provincial, north Italian style which has no direct connection with the great contemporary art of the dynamic style of Byzantine painting. Nevertheless, there is a certain parallel between the situation in Venice and in Byzantium at the close of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century: in both centers there existed, side by side with the great dynamic style, a rather undistinguished (pace A. W. Carr) current, widely disseminated but difficult to trace to its source—the (not very aptly) so-called “decorative style.” The mosaics of the Life of the Virgin seem to me Western parallels to the “style 2400,” equally mediocre and equally difficult to date and to trace.

These difficulties and the horrible state of preservation of the Mariological mosaics, I would like to plead, are extenuating circumstances for my mistakes.⁴

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³L. Eleen, “Acts Illustration in Italy and Byzantium,” *DOP* 31 (1977), 253–78, esp. figs. 1, 2, 13, 16 f, 29 f, 36 f, 47 f. I am grateful to Prof. Eleen for acquainting me with the manuscript of a study of the illuminations in question and their relation to the mosaics of the Life of the Virgin in S. Marco.

⁴An aggravating circumstance is the fact that the late Prof. R. M. Kloos dated the mosaics of the Life of the Virgin in the early thirteenth century on paleographic grounds: Demus, *Mosaics*, I/1, 306.